

THE ARRESTING IMAGE



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FOREWORD

*The mean time spent viewing a work of art was found to be 27.2 seconds, with a median time of 17.0 seconds.*¹

Having worked in the visual arts field for many years we were all too aware of the fleeting acquaintances some viewers have with exhibited artworks. We tell ourselves that visual art is pluralistic and extremely diverse and therefore the broad appeal of artworks will vary considerably. We also accept that even a passing glance is perfectly acceptable, as many people have the capacity to speed-read visual information - particularly if they are art savvy.

At the same time, some artworks 'captivate' the viewer for longer periods than others, and we were intrigued to speculate on whether there were any commonalities that could be identified. Here we ran into issues such as accessibility and challenge, where the former may attract more attention and the latter retain a smaller number of viewers for longer. Indeed challenge is common to much 'contemporary art' and essentially this is our own field of operation. Crucially also, we are aware

that a relationship between the viewer and image will largely depend on just what the viewer brings to the situation.

So at one point we decided to gather together a group of artworks that we thought had the potential to 'touch a nerve'. To give our project some parameters the driving force behind this exhibition then became related to the question of what is it that holds our attention in this image-saturated world? Our immediate interest lay in the 'arrest' factor of artworks. We decided to make essentially subjective decisions based on a personal response to particular artworks that immediately captured our attention. Our agenda can best be described as a mix of intuition and gallery experience.

Pat Brassington and Fiona Lee 2009

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Smith, J & L. 'Spending time on Art' Empirical Studies of the Arts: Volume 10, number 2/2001 pp 229-236.

On Friday, 12th July, 1793, the renowned French artist Jacques-Louis David [1748–1825] visited his friend Jean-Paul Marat [1743–1793] in his apartment on the Rue des Cordeliers in Paris where the ailing revolutionary was to be found immersed in a bath. A makeshift office had been set up: a writing surface consisting of a slab of timber, covered by a green baize cloth, was laid across the tub; and an upturned tea-chest served as a bureau for his quills and ink. The cooling bath was there to ameliorate a skin disease from which Marat suffered; the ‘office’ allowed him, despite his severe illness, to continue to write his revolutionary tracts and denunciations and to maintain his power-base as part of the revolutionary triumvirate formed with Maximilien Robespierre [1758–1794] and Georges Danton [1759–1794].

Two days later Jacques-Louis David had the job of supervising the lying in state of Marat’s rapidly putrefying body prior to his funeral. The extent of the putrefaction, as the art historian Anita Brookner notes, meant that he could not be paraded triumphantly nude like his compatriot Lepelletier. As she goes on to say:

A brilliant compromise was found. In the disaffected church of the Cordeliers, at the end of Marat’s

street, the body was exhibited on a dais, above the bath and the packing case, which look pitifully like a child’s toys in an anonymous canvas in the Musée Carnavalet. A smoking incense burner was placed before the body and the only lighting was artificial. The funeral, which lasted six hours, took place at five o’clock in the evening of 16 July to the accompaniment of muffled drum-beat and cannon.¹

He was buried that evening in the garden of the Cordeliers Club.

The death, which deeply affected David, had come about on Saturday, 13th July when, in the early evening, Charlotte Corday [1768–1793], determined to put paid to the person whom she believed to be the ‘enemy of the people’, was admitted to Marat’s bathroom and, following a brief exchange, had the opportunity to administer a fatal stab to Marat’s chest with a kitchen knife. She was summarily executed by guillotine the day after Marat was buried and two days after Jacques-Louis David had described to the Convention how he envisaged representing Marat in a memorial painting.

*Marat Assassiné*² was first exhibited in the Louvre on the 16th October, 1793, just three months after the subject’s

¹ Brookner, Anita *Jacques-Louis David* London: Chatto and Windus, 1980, 114

² David, Jacques-Louis. *Marat Assassiné*. 1793. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Paris

assassination, and the painting is not only one of the most compelling images to come out of revolutionary France in the last decade of the eighteenth century but is also one of the most arresting images of the moment of death to be created by a European painter up until that point.

David chose to depict the revolutionary figure against a stark tonal backdrop, head swathed in a turban and slumped against the backrest of the bath, torso turned towards the viewer, and with the blood from the stab wound, just below the prominent collar bone, coagulating on the skin, the linen drapery and the letter presented by Corday. In a further magnificent compositional solution the muscular right arm and hand fall to the floor in front of the draped bath. One is aware that the moment of death has occurred but the hand still clutches a quill, as if the subject is clinging to life and to his vocation, despite the fact that the weapon of assassination, a bloodied, bone-handled kitchen knife, lies discarded beside his hand as evidence of his demise. It is a tense, sparse and poignant representation of a human at the moment when life is left behind.

One can imagine that its exemplar might have been *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* by the Italian painter Andrea Mantegna [1431–1506], a tempera work completed around 1480. This painting would have

been nothing short of staggering when it was first seen by Mantegna's audience: although only a tiny painting, it represents the body of the dead Christ stretched out on a marble sarcophagus with the pierced feet seemingly pressing against the picture plane. The composition is depicted in such a way that the presumed viewer peers over and down onto the foreshortened body and the serene face of the dead Christ. But despite its startling matter-of-factness, the greying pallor of the cadaver marks the figure as very definitely that of a corpse. Death has overtaken.

Although there are affinities to be drawn between the Mantegna painting and David's masterpiece, *Marat Assassiné* is, in fact, a painting of an entirely different order and marks a defining moment in the history of modern art. Despite David's reputation as a neo-classical painter, in this particular painting one can see evidence of a more subjective, even romantic, vision at work. With its combination of 'emotion and intuition' and its deeply 'personal and subjective response' it has many of the hallmarks of a Romantic sensibility.³

During the nineteenth century artists found a great many ways to represent the moment of life passing – both Francisco Goya [1746–1828] and Edouard Manet [1832–1883], for instance, in two riveting works *The Third of May, 1808*, 1814 and *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian*,

³ Vaughan, William. "Romanticism." In *Grove Art Online*. Oxford Art Online. 26 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T073207>>. These traits are parts of the centrepiece of Vaughan's definition of Romanticism.

1867, explored the theme of death by firing squad. In each case the agents of death – the executioners – appear to be faceless and anonymous automatons whereas the artists focus on the figures whose lives are in the process of being extinguished: Goya's chief protagonist railing against his fate; Manet's subjects unnervingly resigned to theirs.

Studies were sometimes operatic in scale as in the case of *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819 by Théodore Géricault [1791–1824] and in the *Death of Sardanapulus*, 1827 by Eugène Delacroix [1798–1863]. The former is one of the most complete representations of life and death, hope and despair, elation and profound melancholy in the nineteenth century; in the latter, Sardanapulus presides over the destruction of his harem and we witness the death of his prized stallion as it is put to the sword by one of the slaves. The painting so shocked contemporary audiences that Count Sosthène de la Rochefoucauld [1785–1864], Minister for Fine Arts, called Delacroix into his Parisian office late in 1827 to warn him that he would not be afforded any further commissions unless he tempered his subject matter and, whilst this perhaps firmed up Delacroix's belief in the power of this particular painting, the raw and seemingly gratuitous violence of the work would later be reserved for hunting subjects and other scenes from the natural world.⁴

Although there is much to admire in these great paintings by Goya, Géricault, Delacroix and Manet, that sense of a living subject becoming an object under the intense scrutiny of the artist, which seems to be present in the Marat painting, was probably unrivalled until Pablo Picasso [1881–1973] responded to hearing that his great friend, the poet Carlos Casagemas [1880–1901], had committed suicide on Sunday, 17th February, 1901. Picasso was in Barcelona at the time that Casagemas shot himself in the head at the restaurant L'Hippodrome in Paris following a botched attempt at killing his lover whilst in a jealous rage, but the first painting that Picasso produced some months later of Casagemas laid out on a deathbed seems like a cry from the heart.

Picasso knew Casagemas intimately – they had shared a studio for some time – and he depicts the supine figure in profile with the disembodied head emerging from the swathing drapery. It's as if we are only centimetres away from the corpse, hard up against the bier, and a bright, intensely yellow light from a candle behind the body inflects the drapery and gives an eerie lemony-green cast to the flesh of the face. The evidence of the suicide, a bullet to the right temple, seems like a brutal, angry bruise and the overwhelming feeling of the work is of a life cruelly and summarily taken too soon.

⁴ Trapp, Frank Anderson. *The Attainment of Delacroix*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins Press, 1971

Although two other 1901 paintings of Casagemas are perhaps better known – *Casagemas dans son cercueil* and *L'Evocation* – because they herald the emergence of the blue palette that would dominate Picasso's practice until 1904, *La Mort de Casagemas* seems the more arresting work because of the urgency of the artist's grief and his youthful confrontation with death.

Earlier it was noted that David, in representing Marat with a quill still firmly in his hand, had found a supremely successful solution to how one might represent that transition from life into death. It was noted too that in Manet's *Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, those in the process of being shot seem inured to their fate and one can't help but feel that there is something almost photographic about the scene and its inevitable consequences. Unlike the Goya painting where the narrative force of the chief protagonist's gesture seems almost to belie the presumed outcome, in Manet's painting we seem to be witnessing an exactly quantifiable piece of space and time – a moment; an observed and frozen moment that becomes conceivable with the invention of photography.

Over a century later, in seeking to define the essence of what it is to have one's photographic portrait taken, the French philosopher Roland Barthes made the observation that 'in terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one I

intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis).'⁵

That sense of a living subject becoming an object under the intense scrutiny of the artist seems to be present in the Manet painting but in a prescient way it is also there in *Marat Assassiné*. It's what makes the painting such a modern work.

If Barthes is right, and I think he probably is, then it helps to explain why Robert Capa's [1913–1954] photograph of Federico Borrell Garcia is one of the most utterly compelling works of the twentieth century. *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*, 1936, was taken on the Cordoba front during the Spanish Civil war and while its authenticity is occasionally disputed the image nevertheless continues to press its powerful message. Capa photographed the soldier a split second after the bullet hits him and we see the dying man as the impact of the shot topples him backwards; as his knees give way and with his arms akimbo, he is in the process of losing his grip on his rifle. The afternoon sun casts a dense black shadow, almost like a tomb, beneath his falling body. Shot twice almost simultaneously, once by the marksman and once by the photographer, the figure is dealt

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Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 13-14

a double death: the incontrovertible passing of life and the equally incontrovertible captured moment, a frozen, suspended moment exactly at that point between life and death; the moment that David seeks to achieve in the Marat painting.

Two compelling and memorable video works created during the past decade have prompted this reflection on life passing and they have influenced the shape of this essay for the exhibition, *The Arresting Image*. They are the video works *Guitar Drag*, 2000 by the American artist Christian Marclay [b. 1953] and *Dead Horse*, 1998 by the British-based artist Tim Macmillan [b. 1959]. *Guitar Drag*, which was first shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney in 2001, is a fourteen minute video loop in which Marclay attaches a noose to the neck of an electric guitar which is then secured to the tow-ball of a large beaten-up pick-up truck; a lead joins the guitar to an amplified speaker on the back of the truck. Marclay then films the event in which the guitar is dragged to its eventual destruction across a variety of terrains. The sound of the guitar as it screeches its piercing anthem is absolutely harrowing. There is an immediate connection to be made to the Black protest music of the American south – *Strange Fruit* by Billie Holliday [1915–1959] comes to mind straight away – and one realises that Marclay has found a powerfully persuasive metaphor for the death of James Byrd [1949–1998]

who, near the town of Jasper in Texas, was dragged for three miles by his feet and to his eventual excruciating death behind a pick-up truck. The perpetrators, Shawn Berr, Lawrence Brewer and John King, were convicted of his murder in 1999. The video with its unforgettable riff has the heart-wrenching feel of an extended lamentation on a life passing.

Tim Macmillan's *Dead Horse*, which is being shown in this current exhibition, has a similar unforgettable impact. During the 1980s Macmillan devised a system to photograph an object in the round, a system that enables the viewer to witness an object from a variety of viewpoints but unlike the movie tracking shot, where the camera is recording an unfolding event in real time, Macmillan's system works on the principle of each camera photographing exactly the same moment in time. These camera shots are then spliced together and the viewer has the opportunity to witness the same moment from multiple viewpoints.

In *Dead Horse* a horse (in fact two horses in the work) is 'knackered' in an abattoir: the cameras capture the exact moment when the horse is lifted off the ground by the impact of the bullet to the head and as the spliced camera shots track around the animal we witness that same moment of suspension over and over again. In one sequence the horse has its forelegs folded

towards its body and its back legs stretched out as if it was in the process of leaping forward; in the second sequence another horse is represented at a split second earlier when both pairs of legs are drawn up towards the body and before the back legs begin to kick out as it falls.

In an article in *Frieze Magazine*, David Barrett observes of this work:

If the photographic image is to be understood as a kind of death, with its indexical link to the missing subject, then an animation of photographs can only be seen as a kind of living death: a re-animation, which is neither life nor death.⁶

Dead Horse seems to be all the more arresting and disturbing because we witness the moment, as Barthes describes it, when the animal is neither subject nor object but somehow held in suspension between two states of being.

Death, too, is shot through the photographs of Roger Ballen. A forlorn, lifeless fish lies beached on a white plate in *Lunchtime*, 2001 from Ballen's series titled 'Shadow Chamber'. In another photograph from the same series, *Puppies in fishtanks*, 2003, a disembodied head stares fixedly at two puppies imprisoned in glass tanks stacked one atop the other; in the top one a lifeless puppy lies prone; in the tank

below we can discern a small gap where the lid of the nearly-sealed tank has been drawn back and a second puppy seems to tense its hind legs as it stretches towards the source of oxygen. It seems to bay. It's impossible to tell whether the puppies are alive or rendered lifelike at the hands of a taxidermist.

In *Bitten*, 2004 from the series 'Shadow Chamber' a man is clothed only in a hooded anorak and is seated in a slumped position on a simple wooden chair. His reflection can partly be seen in the mirror-surface of the floor; behind him a deadly puff adder slithers away from the chair. Above his head, drawn on the wall are two stick figures: one laughs like a ghoul; the other seems like a ghost waiting to receive the seated figure into another spirit world.

In *Tommy, Samson and a mask*, 2000 from the series 'Outland', a black African child stares blankly at a point slightly to the left of the camera lens; stretched out on a rough table in front of him is the profile head and upper torso of a supine white man – emaciated, cadaverous and with eyes fixated on a point on the ceiling above him. It's hard not to think of Mantegna's *Dead Christ* and Picasso's *Casagemas* in this context – again a kind of lamentation on life passing.

Ballen's photographs are shot in black and white and invariably with a crisp and searing

⁶ Barrett, David. "Animation: Lea Gallery, London, UK." *Frieze Magazine*.42; <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/animation/> (viewed: 29/04/2009) (1998)

sharpness. There is nothing diffused about these works even though they oscillate between the factual and the theatrical, the actual and the fictional. In *Eugene on the phone*, 2000 from the series 'Outland' for instance, we see a young man reclining on a worn sofa, his body pressed into the pliant cushions. As he stares languidly outwards towards the camera with phone in his left hand, his right hand firmly grips the hind legs and tail of a tabby cat, which is straining with all its might, front paws and claws embedded in the sofa's back, to escape. The incipient and gratuitous violence of the scene is quite shocking and by no means ameliorated by a line drawing on the wall of a coat hanger and a tea-shirt that appear to mirror obscenely the ugly nexus between boy and animal.

In an interview with Doug McClelland on the Saatchi Gallery website, Roger Ballen had the following to say in response to McClelland's observation about the enforced but often violent coexistence between humans and animals that is so prevalent in his work:

These pictures can be shocking to Western culture but when those same people go to the supermarket and see raw meat hanging there it has no effect on them. Their stomachs are full of that stuff day and night, but they get upset when they see someone pulling on a cat. Yet they're responsible for

a murder every day. You support the murderers who kill the chickens. This whole kind of denial exists throughout Western culture, which seems to me to be sort of a part of a deeper malaise.⁷

Ballen's works bear witness to this malaise. In an image from the *Boarding House* titled *Cut Loose*, 2005, Ballen photographs a seemingly lifeless youth with rolled ankles that cause his feet to barely touch the floor; his head and shoulders slump forward and yet he remains in an upright position against the grey backdrop; a tangle of electrical wires that might have been used to bind and throttle or to torture him cascade down on either side of his body and over his naked torso; shears – the stuff of nightmares – lie open on the floor near his feet. The work is a grim reminder that the so-called 'civilised world' allowed events such as the abuses in the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad to occur. As with Macmillan's work, these images appear to operate in a suspended space, a space where reality and illusion appear to co-exist, a space where the artist can confront life and death.

A different kind of suspension or delay functions in recent work by Alicia King but it nevertheless also has life and death as principal concerns. *Slip me some skin*, 2008 is a body of work which, quite literally, is of the body. She received ethics approval in

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McClelland, Douglas. "Roger Ballen in conversation with Doug McClelland". London, 2009. Saatchi Online: http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/blog/art_news/roger_ballen_in_conversation_with_doug_mcclelland/5513. 28/04/2009 2009

Tasmania and Western Australia to obtain living skin tissue from a donor – in this case of breast tissue– which she was then able to use to ‘build’ new living forms that were then sealed and suspended in sculptural glass vessels that function as a modern equivalent of the religious reliquary. Using part of the anonymously donated tissue she was able to harvest a whole new body of cells which could then be anchored onto some of the remaining tissue in order to sculpt new forms from the living material: a crude crucifix is one example; vampire fangs were another.

The resultant works are at once ravishingly beautiful and jaw-droppingly confronting: a tear-drop vessel, for instance, is created in which the sculpted tissue in the form of vampire’s fangs is suspended. Its jewel-like fragility is enhanced in a delicate surround made from flock and resin that forms part of the ensuing sculpture. In speaking about these works, King has observed the following:

The presentation of these once-living preserved forms also illustrates the actual limitations of our technological expertise over life. Though the work involves processes of growth, the cells inevitably end in death; a transition of the body from a living subjective entity to a thing for the taking/growing/ breeding for biomedical capital, or in this case, artistic form.⁸

Even though the tissue no longer lives, King has been able to create a work that provides a profoundly unsettling metaphor for the arresting of the passage from one state of being to another, in this case, from living tissue to dead tissue.

In some ways like Alicia King, who has been primarily concerned with the surface of the body – both her own and others – Amanda Davies’ recent paintings have been dominated by an uneasy exploration of the state of the body. In *Mute*, 2006, for instance, a young girl appears to have rendered herself catatonic in the act of screaming. One is reminded of a performance AAA-AAA by Marina Abramovic and Ulay in 1978 when the two artists were filmed screaming at one another for around fifteen minutes; as the performance unfolded, Abramovic slipped into a catatonic state, going through the motions of screaming even though no sound emanated: in effect she had been rendered powerless and mute in this dramatic confrontation.⁹ There are several recent works, including the painting *Sick*, 2005 in this exhibition, in which the supine figure of the artist is represented in a swathe of linen and colourful quilts. They are uneasy works in which reverie seems to conjure up monstrous shadows, linen has the potential to smother and suffocate, and the figure seems completely overwhelmed by matter.

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King, Alicia. “Correspondence to the author.” Ed. Jonathan Holmes. Hobart, 2009.

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Abramovic, Marina and Ulay. *Relation Work and Detour*. Amsterdam: Idea Books, 1980. Pp. 102-107

In *Sick* the figure lies on a hospital bed almost completely overtaken by a multi-covered quilt. The bed hovers in space, as if it has been levitated, and a plant and its cast shadow loom over the supine figure. One might immediately make a link to the well-rehearsed tradition of representing reclining women by artists ranging from Titian, Watteau, David, Goya and Manet but the artists that come immediately to mind are John Henry Fuseli [1741–1825] and Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola) [1908–2001]. Davies’ penchant, in a number of recent paintings, to represent the reclining figure in a crumple of heavy bed linen and quilts has a similar suffocating intensity to *The Nightmare*, 1781 by Fuseli. I am thinking here, for instance, of Davies’ *Sick*, and the two paintings *Bedridden*, 2008, and *Posing a threat*, 2008 in which the reclining figure makes monster shadows on the wall.

Discussing work from around 2006, Sean Kelly talks about the larger and ambitious paintings that employ what he describes as the ‘visually stunning but technically complex method of reverse painting onto plastic which is then stretched over canvas’. He makes the point that in a number of the larger works ‘the figure is removed from its place in the real (photographed) world and relocated in a picture space – a new place that focuses its emotional character and intensifies its significance.’

Nowhere is this more true than in the 2008 painting *The Wreck* in which the artist depicts a skeleton stretched out on a draped bier that appears to float in an indeterminate space; a knife hovers threateningly in the foreground below. As Davies notes in correspondence, it is meant to be a self-portrait: herself imagined dead. Two sources in particular influenced this work.¹⁰ On the one hand there are the numerous paintings by Balthus in which the reclining figure of a young woman is represented on a divan or recliner; on the other is one of the dominant figures in Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, the young man in the foreground of the raft, naked except for his socks, who is prevented from slipping off into the water by the grieving older sailor. What Davies has attempted to achieve is an imagining of her body stripped of everything other than its underpinning armature, the skeleton itself. It is a painting of considerable bravura in which she imagines herself beyond life.

There’s a quite lengthy passage of conversation in the Saatchi interview between David McClelland and Roger Ballen when they discuss one of Ballen’s most confronting portraits, the photograph titled *Sergeant F. de Bruin, Department of Prisons employee, Orange Free State*, 1992. The work depicts the prison guard in what looks like a slightly oversized uniform and slightly undersized military-style cap. It’s quite hard to describe the face, which seems

¹⁰ Davies, Amanda. “Correspondence to the author.” Ed. Jonathan Holmes. Hobart, 2009.

too big for the body and appears over long, almost rectangular, to be properly human; the mouth seems too wide and he has huge jug ears. By no stretch of the imagination can he be described as a beauty. Ballen is absolutely unrelenting and slightly scary in his interpretation of this figure particularly in the face of McClemont's efforts to humanise the prison guard. Ballen says:

Basically, some people see him as a monkey. The character of a buffoon and a monkey in a prison guard, whatever. There are all those masks you see in the face. The face reveals the human condition in all sorts of ways. He's funny, he's tragic.

And then a few comments later he says:

Behind the face is always the monkey. Remember that. I've been living in Africa a long time. I've really seen a lot about the human condition. Behind the face is the monkey. You won't get me to change that point. I don't care if every PC person wants to shoot me for it.

And when McClemont seeks to ameliorate the tone of the discussion by suggesting that the viewer sees in the image the connection between the human and the simian as one involving chromosomes, Ballen remonstrates:

No, it's not about chromosomes – that's PC thinking – the only thing that crosses your mind is: there's my face. There's my id. That's what I come from. I come from a monkey. That's your cousin in that picture.¹¹

Sanja Pahoki also explores the often-confronting nexus between animal and human in her installation, *Cub Separated from Spooked Polar Bear*, 2008. The installation relates to a story that emerged in early 2008 about a polar bear cub in the Nuremberg Zoo in Germany that was separated from its mother on the grounds that the cub's life may have been endangered. This followed the earlier case of the Berlin Zoo polar bear, Knut, who, having been abandoned by his mother, was brought up as a bottle-fed cub by the zookeepers and became a star attraction at the zoo. In the Nuremberg case, according to Christel Kucharz in a report on the Australian Broadcasting Commission [ABC] in January, 2008, Flocke was taken from her mother after an outcry occurred when the zookeepers failed to intervene when another polar bear in the zoo killed her two cubs. Flocke's own plight became more pressing in the aftermath of this event when her mother was observed padding around the compound with the cub in her mouth, and occasionally dropping her.¹² It was at this point that the zookeepers stepped in and removed the cub from the mother.

¹¹ McClemont [2009] [All three quotations]

¹² Kucharz, Christel. "Baby Polar Bear Named Flocke." News. ABC News online Jan. 18, 2008 2008. <http://abcnews.go.com/international/story?id=4154118&page=1>, Viewed: 02/05/2009

The event caused a storm of controversy as it had in the case of Knut: as with Alicia King's 'vampire' constructed of living tissue and floating in a glass container, the polar bears are suspended and incarcerated in an artificial habitat, the zoo, and there they are held for the term of their natural life. Does one hold the cubs in suspension for the length of their lives and in order to lengthen the life of a rapidly endangered species? Or does one leave them alone to have their fate determined? As Christel Kucharz reports, the conundrum is further complicated because of the aberrant animal behaviour that comes with this enforced artificial habitat. She quotes the animal rights activist Juergen Ortmuller who argued that 'keeping polar bears in a zoo has nothing to do with a proper upbringing. I believe that Nuremberg Zoo's decision to hand-rear the cub will just produce another psychopath.' He was, of course, referring to the Berlin Zoo's Knut who, Ortmuller states, 'is increasingly showing behavioural problems.'

Have you ever seen a polar bear playing with a blanket? Is that considered normal behaviour?... In as much that we need to preserve those animals, it is totally wrong to give the public the impression that one of the most dangerous and powerful predators on Earth is just a cuddly creature. Those animals need to grow up in their natural habitat, not in a zoo.¹³

Sanja Pahoki explores the behavioural problems that are embedded in this series of events in an amusing and absurdist series of actions in which the artist is seen dressed in a polar bear mask and fake front paws hugging trees: it is an action that is seen by many to be one of the loonier aspects of the wilderness protest movement but equally it is one that can serve as a metaphor for some of the more extreme behavioural aberrations that have occurred as a result of the enforced incarceration of animals in zoos.¹⁴

Sanja Pahoki, in the installation, extends the metaphor, through text, drawings and photographs in order to draw out other aspects of mother-child relationships and mental illness. At its scariest we are confronted with a work in the installation involving fluorescent tubes that explores the act of infanticide. High on the wall a fluorescent line drawing of the outline of a seemingly malevolent polar bear is represented. In shadow we see a cub at the moment when the mother lets it loose from the grip of her mouth and then again as a shadowy line drawing half way down the wall; the falling cub is then picked up once again as a fluorescent drawing centimetres from the floor as it plunges to its presumed death. Manet. Capa. Macmillan.

The putative subject of Sally Rees' *Encore*, is a karaoke-style video recording by the artist of the aria *Je crois entendre encore* [I still

¹³ Kucharz [2008]

¹⁴ The truth of this observation was brought sharply into focus on 11th April, 2009 when a woman entered the polar bear enclosure in which Knut is held along with several other bears. Quite what moved her to do this other than that she thought she was swimming with cuddly animals is not known but she almost met a grisly death before she was eventually pulled out of the compound. Her crazy action has also been suspended forever on film.

believe I hear] from *The Pearl Fishers*, 1863 by Georges Bizet [1838–1875]. In Bizet’s opera, this song is sung by one of the chief protagonists, Nadir. In their youth, Zurga, and Nadir had been infatuated with a beautiful priestess named Leila. Nadir has recently returned to the pearl fishermen’s village and when Zurga, who has been crowned king by the fishermen, and Nadir meet up they come together to sing one of the best-known duets in the Opera, *Au fond du Temple* [In the Depths of the Temple]. In the scene the two men recall the ravishing beauty of the priestess and recall their vow to renounce their love for Leila. In a tale of devoted friendship, passion and blind rage, it is soon revealed in *Je crois entendre encore* that Nadir remains infatuated by the ‘night enchantress’ Leila who also has returned to the village heavily veiled to bless the pearl fishing fleet. Once the two are revealed as lovers and with Zurga incandescent with rage, they are condemned to death and their funeral pyre is prepared. In the third act, after Zurga has discovered that in earlier life Leila had saved his own life, he contrives to set fire to the village in order to force the pearl fishers and the high priest to return to put out the fire. Zurga frees the lovers and sends them on their way but once the high priest discovers the subterfuge, Zurga is condemned to death and put to the fire.

The theme of immolation is a focus of the climax of *The Pearl Fishers* and can be

read as a sub-text of the opera of itself – burning desire, burning hatred, fiery tempers, purging and redemption through fire – and Sally Rees’ enactment of the aria can be read as a kind of self-immolation as she self-destructs during the two hour performance from which the short video is extrapolated. In the video we watch as Rees makes a serious attempt to sing the lyrics of *Je crois entendre encore* as she listens to a recording of the aria. The video in a split screen shows bookended versions of her attempts to sing the duet, first sober, and then as she succumbs increasingly to the effects of multiple glasses of dry martinis laced with gin. While in the left hand section of the video we witness a relatively focused Rees, intently listening to the music and straining to keep in tune and on time, on the right-hand side an increasingly inebriated Rees, sways, lolls and stumbles her way through the duet as she gradually loses control.

The work has been selected for several exhibitions now perhaps because of the stark and pitiless insight it gives into human frailty, mental and emotional collapse, and sheer loneliness and exhaustion. Indeed, there is much to remind one of the Sydney Pollack movie *They Shoot Horses Don’t They?* 1969 where the dancers in a marathon dance competition dance themselves towards eventual self-destruction. The end of *Encore* is brutal and shambolic. As with Davies’ and Pahoki’s work, Rees takes us

into a field of self-reflection that is both dark and troubling – at the edge of what one might wish to imagine.

Throughout this essay, mention has been made of artists seeking to capture the moment between life and death, of the place in between states of opposition, of a space of suspension between time present and time passed – perhaps a moment of stasis. And yet there is one artist in this exhibition whose work, on the surface, seems to buck this evident concern. We seem to be in a world of pure pleasure and ebullience when we first begin to explore the works of Fred Fisher such as the three polychrome reliefs titled *Field Study 1, 2 and 3*, 2009 and *Pattern 8 and 9*. In both series the artist has applied a pattern of painted acorn caps to a high-key colour field – *Field Study 1, 2 and 3* are red caps on yellow and red on flesh pink and orange and red on light tan; *Pattern 8 and 9* are yellow and blue on red and a backdrop of blue and black on yellow on a backdrop of black. In all five works the eye is inveigled into believing at first that the patterning is consistent – their seeming orderliness and the consistency of the ground trick the eye into thinking that there is mathematical precision here whereas, on closer inspection, not only is the patterning relatively erratic but there are variations of scale in the acorn caps. Colour somehow gives them a sense of alignment and makes the brain believe that there is a pattern. All is not as it would seem.

In the two other works exhibited in *The Arresting Image*, *Light and Dark*, 2009 and *Structure*, 2009 intricate stacks of alternating black and white layers of painted mdf are massed together in combinations that in *Light and Dark* confound the eye so completely that it becomes almost impossible to judge whether one is reading an object in relief or whether it is recessed. The object seems to oscillate between two states, flicking backwards and forwards, never resting. Whereas in Macmillan's *Dead Horse* we witness the same moment repeated over and over again as the animation moves around the horse, in Fred Fisher's black and white works there is a kind of perceptual animation that is more like the operation of a light switch, from dark to light, from light to dark, from recess to relief, relief to recess. Perhaps then, Fisher also finds a way of suspending the passage from one state to another, a similar moment of parenthesis as that which makes David's *Marat Assassiné* such a quintessentially modern moment in the history of art.

Jonathan Holmes
Hobart, May 2009

ARTISTS
ARTISTS

ROGER BALLEEN

Roger Ballen (born New York) has been living in Johannesburg, South Africa since 1974. Trained as a geologist, Ballen has been photographing for over 25 years, mostly in remote areas outside of Johannesburg. His work walks the line between documentary photography and fine art offering both challenging social commentary and allegories of lived experiences as well as surreal takes on human destiny. The humans and animals in Ballen's photographs appear isolated and lost, yet strangely empowered at the same time.

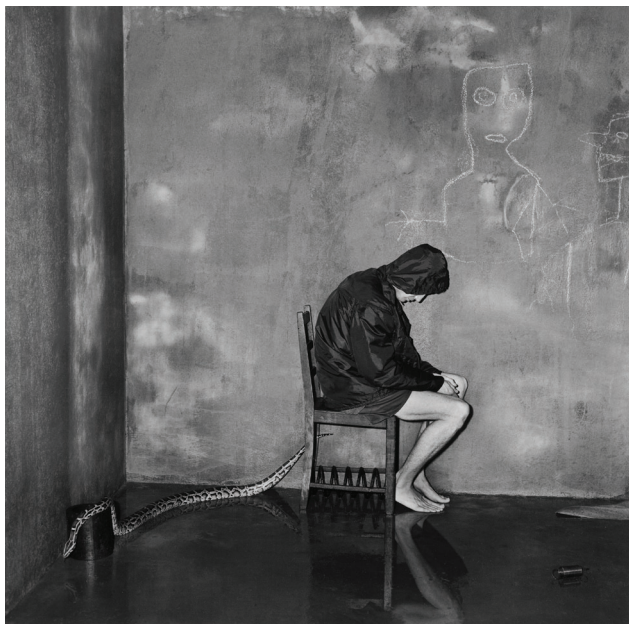
An artist of major international stature Ballen regularly shows his work in galleries and museums around the world. His photographs are included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the Victoria & Albert Museum, London and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. He has won numerous awards including, in 2001, the prize for Best Photographic Book of

the Year at the *PhotoEspaña Festival* in Madrid for *Outland* and he was named Photographer of the Year at the inaugural *Rencontres de la photographie d'Arles*, France in 2002.

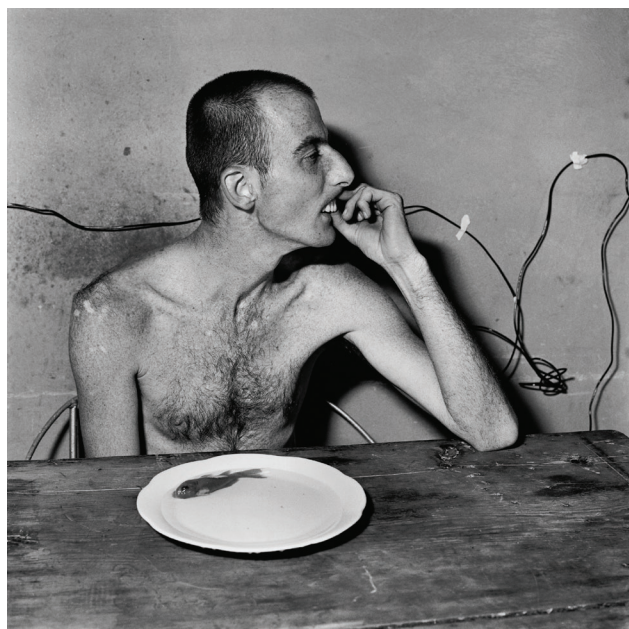
Stills Gallery, Sydney exhibited Ballen's work in 2006 – his first exhibition in Australia and in 2008, a large scale exhibition, *Roger Ballen: Brutal, Tender, Human, Animal* was presented by the Art Gallery of Western Australia before touring to the National Library of Australia, Canberra in 2009.

Following the success and critical acclaim of the Phaidon publications *Outland* in 2001 and *Shadow Chamber* in 2005, Phaidon Press have, this year, published a new collection of Ballen's photographs entitled *Boarding House*.

Roger Ballen is represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney in Australia.



Bitten 2004



Lunchtime 2001



Sick 2005



The Wreck 2008

AMANDA DAVIES

Amanda Davies was born in Melbourne and arrived in Tasmania in 2000 after spending many years living in Western Australia. She was awarded a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania in 2002 and a BFA Honours degree (First Class) from the same institution in 2003. Davies explores the indefinite possibilities of language through the medium of paint. She is interested in pauses and moments in a narrative and predominantly uses personal photographs – still moments – as starting points for her paintings. Her recent solo exhibitions include *What lies there*, Bett Gallery, Hobart at Depot Gallery, Sydney (2008); *A brief fiction*, Bett Gallery, Hobart (2006); *Sick: an installation* at CAST Gallery, Hobart (2005) and Canberra Contemporary Art Space, ACT (2005) and *Installation*, Foyer Space, State Library of Tasmania, Hobart (2003).

Davies' work has been represented in numerous group exhibitions over the last decade including *The World in Painting*, an Asialink/Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne touring exhibition (2008); *Fierce or Friendly: Humans in the Animal World*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart (2007); *The Glover Prize for Tasmanian Landscape Painting* (2006); *Letitia Street Studio Show*, Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania (2005) and *found*, Inflight ARI, Hobart (2004).

In 2007 she was awarded a University of Tasmania/Arts Tasmania Rosamond McCulloch Studio Residency, at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris and was also commissioned to create new work for the Royal Hobart Hospital Pain Management Unit, Hobart.

Amanda Davies is represented by Bett Gallery, Hobart.

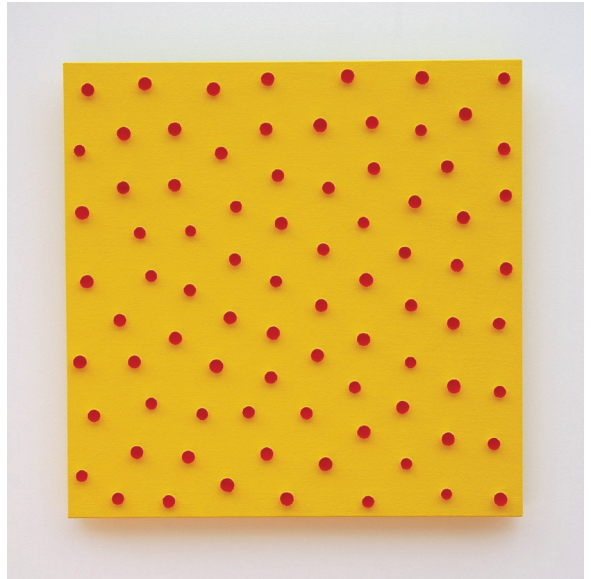
FRED FISHER

Fred Fisher was born in Orange, NSW. Prior to settling in Tasmania to study art in 1985 Fisher practiced his trade as a toolmaker and design draughtsman in Australia and the UK. He was also employed as a mechanic and tour leader in the adventure travel industry and undertook numerous journeys following the overland routes between the UK, India and Nepal.

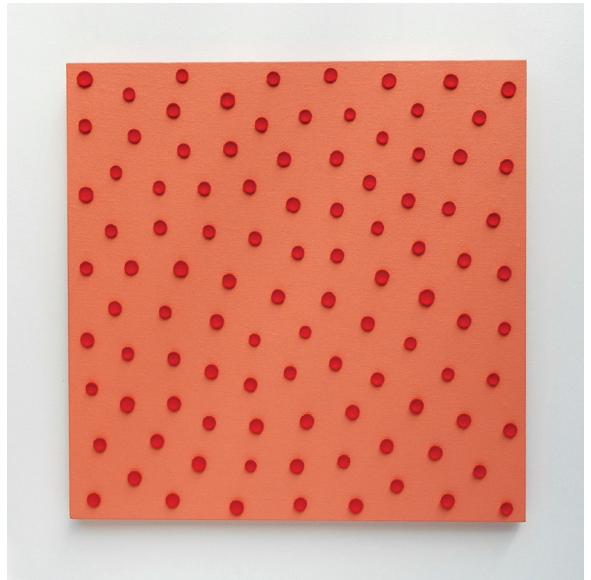
Fisher was awarded a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania in 1988 followed by a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1990 and a PhD degree from the same institution in 2006. Fisher is interested in the process of sculpture; how it is made. He utilises these processes to explore the qualities of volume and form, positive and negative space and the acumen of human visual perception.

Fisher's latest solo exhibition was *Fred Fisher: Sculpture*, Design Centre of Tasmania, Launceston (2007) and he is a finalist in the 2009 *City of Hobart Art Prize*. His work has been selected for inclusion in various group exhibitions including *REGISTER: Tasmanian Artists 2006*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart (2006); *Biennial Acquisition Exhibition: Tasmanian Wood Design Collection*, Bond Store, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart (2006); *DELUXE: decorous crossovers between art and design*, Plimsoll Gallery, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania (2006) and *The National Sculpture Prize and Exhibition*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (2005 and 2001).

Fred Fisher is an Honorary Research Associate at the School of Art, University of Tasmania and is represented by Colville Street Art Gallery, Hobart.



Field Study 1 2009



Field Study 2 2009



Slip me some skin 2008

ALICIA KING

Alicia King is a Hobart based cross-media artist. For the past few years she has been delving into the realms of biological technology at the University of Tasmania's School of Medicine, after doing independent study at SymbioticA, University of Western Australia. She recently completed her PhD, *Transformations of the flesh; rupturing embodiment through biotechnology, an artistic exploration of relationships between biotech practices and the physical, ethical and ritual body* at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania. King's practice explores biological permutations in humans, animals and the wider environment, and alludes to that which generally lies outside of the everyday category of the 'living'.

Over the last decade King has exhibited throughout Australia and beyond, including at The National Museum of Australia, Canberra; Federation Square and Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne; Firstdraft, Sydney; Metro Arts Brisbane and CAST Gallery, Hobart. During 2007 King undertook various Residencies in Europe including Vrij Glas, The Arts and Genomics Centre and Foundation b.a.d, Amsterdam and exhibited in the Asialink event *The Last Vestige* in Ho Chi Minh City.

Alicia King is a recent recipient of the 2008 Moorilla Scholarship; an Arts Tasmania Dombrovskis Award; and a RUN_WAY Grant from the Australia council to undertake a further Residency at SymbioticA.

Tim Macmillan lives and works near Bath in England. His practice spans New-media – Multimedia and Photography. While engaged in BA and Post-graduate studies at the Bath Academy of Art and the Slade School of Art between 1981–1984 he developed his sculptural time-slice camera which is made up of a film with a lens over each frame, capable of producing a sweeping tracking shot of a movement frozen in time. With this camera, he produced the extraordinary *Dead Horse*.

Between 1985-90 Macmillan resided in Tokyo where he worked as a freelance photographer, photographic artist and film-maker. On his return to the UK in 1990 he continued his photographic practice and development of the time-frozen effect while also directing music videos, commercials and short films. In 1997 he established 'Time-Slice Films Ltd' with a view to establishing the frozen-time effect within the TV and motion-picture industry. His gallery and short-film works have been acclaimed internationally.

Dead Horse was short-listed for *The Citibank Photography Prize*, Photographers' Gallery, London in 2000 and his short-film *Ferment* was short-listed for the British Animation Awards, ANIMATE!, Lux Cinema, London in 1999.



Stills from *Dead Horse* 1998



'Polar bear mother repeatedly drops cub'
Detail from *Cub Separated from Spooked Polar Bear* 2008

SANJA PAHOKI

Sanja Pahoki was born in Osijek, Croatia. She migrated to Melbourne in the early 1970s. She holds a Bachelor of Arts (double major in psychology and philosophy) from the University of Melbourne and has worked in Forensic Psychology at Monash University and as a research assistant for Turning Point (Alcohol and Drug Centre), Melbourne. In 2006 Pahoki was awarded a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne where she also works as a sessional lecturer in the photography department. She has exhibited her work both nationally and internationally with recent solo exhibitions including *Cub separated from spooked polar bear*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (2009); *Hello*, Whitestreet Project, Frankston, Melbourne (2009); *Mum, dad; together*, Seventh Gallery, Melbourne (2008); *Shut up my darling*, Studio 12, Gertrude Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne (2008); *Be turned on to the artful insights of Sanja Pahoki*, Lismore

Regional Gallery, NSW (2008); *Bang head, repeatedly*, 24-seven, Melbourne (2006); *I haven't been feeling myself lately*, area contemporary art space inc., Melbourne (2006); *What's your oeuvre?*, 1st Floor Artist and Writers Space, Melbourne (2001) and *Suitable Women*, Citylights, Centre Place, Melbourne (2001).

She has participated in many group exhibitions over the last decade including *The more you ignore me, the closer I get*, curated by Alison Hubler, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane (2009); *What is (Australia Like)*, curated by Kim Donaldson, Director's Lounge, Berlin (2008); *Ill Communication*, curated by Jacqueline Doughty, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne (2007); *Global Fusion*, Palais Porcia, Vienna (2006); *Self-Made Women*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2002) and *B-side*, Bus Gallery, Melbourne (2002).

Until recently Sanja Pahoki was a committee member of Kings Ari, Melbourne and a studio artist at Gertrude Contemporary Art Space. In 2008 she undertook a SIM International Studio Residency in Reykjavik, Iceland.

SALLY REES

Sally Rees lives and works in Hobart and graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania in 2005. Her wide-ranging practice has incorporated performance, new media, installation and the written and spoken word.

Her recent solo exhibitions since include *In Stereo: Video auto-portraits by Sally Rees*, Burnie Regional Art Gallery, Tasmania (2009) and *A Loft*, LSSp, Letitia Street Studios, Hobart (2001). She has participated in many group exhibitions including *Limbic* (curated by Victor Medrano), Mop Projects, Sydney (2009); *Hard Party: Artists interpretation of a party cruise*, Circular Quay, Sydney (2009); *Tidal Art Prize*, Devonport Regional Gallery, Tasmania (2008); *Inflight – 5 years of Art*, Inflight Ari, Hobart (2008); *Parallel*, Long Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart

and touring nationally (2008) and *Of Heaven and Earth*, with Matt Warren, Squeezebox Gallery, Montreal in 2008.

Over the last decade Rees has undertaken numerous collaborations with other visual artists, theatre companies, musicians and performers, both nationally and internationally often culminating in overseas residencies including a CESTA residency, Czech Republic in 2006 and a Western Front Media Program residency, Vancouver, Canada in 2001. Rees was awarded a Tasmanian School of Art, Rosamond McCulloch Studio residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris in 2004.

Sally Rees' current individual practice consists mostly of time-based works and photographs that draw on small biographical details (favourite songs, items of clothing, objects in everyday use) as the starting point for image and scenic development.



Still from *Encore* 2005

LIST OF WORKS

Roger Ballen

Pounce

from 'Boarding House' 2005

Silver gelatin print

45 x 45 cm

Eugene on the phone

from 'Outland' 2000

Silver gelatin print

40 x 40 cm

Bitten

from 'Shadow Chamber' 2004

Silver gelatin print

40 x 40 cm

Bent Back

from 'Shadow Chamber' 2001

Silver gelatin print

40 x 40 cm

Lunchtime

from 'Shadow Chamber' 2001

Silver gelatin print

40 x 40 cm

Mimicry

from 'Boarding House' 2005

Silver gelatin print

45 x 45 cm

Stefanus

from 'Shadow Chamber' 2001

Silver gelatin print

40 x 40 cm

Birdwoman

from 'Shadow Chamber' 2003

Silver gelatin print

80 x 80 cm

Tommy, Samson and a mask

from 'Outland' 2000

Silver gelatin print

80 x 80 cm

Puppies in fishtanks

from 'Shadow Chamber' 2003

Silver gelatin print

80 x 80 cm

All courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney

Amanda Davies

Sick 2005

Diptych

Enamel on plastic

Each: 130 x 354 cm

The Wreck 2008

Enamel on plastic on canvas

120 x 181 cm

Both courtesy the artist and Bett Gallery Hobart

Fred Fisher

Light and Dark 2009

MDF, acrylic paint

49 x 26 x 17 cm

Structure 2009

MDF, acrylic paint

49 x 26 x 20 cm

Field Study 1 2009

Cupules, acrylic paint, canvas, MDF

50 x 50 cm

Field Study 2 2009

Cupules, acrylic paint, canvas, MDF

50 x 50 cm

Field Study 3 2009

Cupules, acrylic paint, canvas, MDF

50 x 50 cm

Pattern 8 2009

Cupules, acrylic paint, canvas, MDF
50 x 45 cm

Pattern 9 2009

Cupules, acrylic paint, canvas, MDF
50 x 45 cm

Large Head 1988

Fibreglass, clay wash
130 x 130 x 100 cm
All courtesy the artist and Colville Street
Gallery, Hobart

Alicia King

Slip me some skin 2008

Human tissue (cultured cells and tissue,
originating from an anonymous cosmetic
surgery patient), agar, glass, resin, flock
17 x 15 x 10 cm
Courtesy the artist

Tim Macmillan

Dead Horse 1998

Installation/Video projection
15 min loop
Courtesy the artist and LUX, London

Sanya Pahoki

Cub Separated from Spooked Polar Bear 2008

neon, pencil drawings,
type C photographs and DVDs
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

Sally Rees

Encore 2005

Single channel video
3 mins. 16 secs.
Courtesy the artist

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Many thanks also to Mike Sperlinger and staff, LUX, London (distributing agents for Tim Macmillan); Bronwen Rennex and staff, Stills Gallery, Sydney (representing Roger Ballen in Australia and Trish Fisher, Johannesburg (Roger Ballen's personal assistant).

The exhibition would not have been possible without the important contributions of the following people: Professor Jonathan Holmes for his always as ever thoughtful essay; Katie Hepper for her design skills in association with James Newitt and Sarah Owen (GAP Studio, Tasmanian School of Art); Aaron Horsley and Bill Hammond for IT technical assistance; members of the Plimsoll Gallery Committee and Tasmanian School of Art administration staff.

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Catalogue essay Jonathan Holmes

Catalogue design Katie Hepper

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The Arresting Image

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15 May–5 June, 2009

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